Alternative Programs Handbook

Alberta
LEARNING

ALBERTA LEARNING CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Alberta. Alberta Learning. Special Programs Branch.
Alternative programs handbook.

ISBN 0-7785-2539-2

1. Alternative education - Alberta. 2. Educational innovations - Alberta.
3. Curriculum change - Alberta. I. Title.

LC46.8.C22.A333 2003 371.04

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BACKGROUND

Alberta's learning system respects the right and responsibility of parents to make decisions that best suit the needs of their children. By supporting programs of choice, the province strengthens the public school system and promotes the availability of diverse educational experiences for Alberta students. Over the last 15 years, legislation has encouraged school boards to work with parents, their community, and stakeholders to provide choices in educational programming that will meet the needs and interests of students and parents.

The 1988 *School Act* gave school boards the authority to respond to parents wanting increased choice in the education of their children by introducing the concept of alternative programs. Alternative programs were given the definition of programs that emphasize a particular language, culture, religion, subject matter or teaching philosophy.

In 1994, government made more changes to the *School Act* by opening the boundaries that existed between school boards and schools and by creating charter schools. The changes enabled parents to send their children to their choice of any public school in the province, including charter schools and alternative programs, provided there were sufficient facilities and resources available.

In 2000, government released the *School Act - Revised Statutes of Alberta (RSA 2000)*. Alberta Learning has prepared this handbook to assist school boards, school staff, school councils and other interested groups in offering, developing and implementing alternative programs under section 21 of the *School Act (RSA 2000)*.

By strongly supporting regular education programs, as well as promoting alternative programs when demand and resources are present, Alberta's diverse education system prepares students for the changing nature of the world in which we live.

OFFERING AN ALTERNATIVE PROGRAM

Definition

The wording of the current *School Act* makes it clear that a school board makes the decision about whether it will offer a section 21 alternative program and what it will offer as an alternative program. The *School Act* does not, however, explicitly require an alternative program to be established through a board motion.

School Act, section 21 (RSA 2000 Chapter S-3)

21 (1) In this section, "alternative program" means an education program that

(a) emphasizes a particular language, culture, religion or subject-matter, or

(b) uses a particular teaching philosophy,

but that is not a special education program, a program referred to in section 10 or a program of religious education offered by a separate school board.

(2) If a board determines that there is sufficient demand for a particular alternative program, the board may offer that program to those students whose parents enroll them in the program.

(3) A board that offers an alternative program shall continue to offer the regular education program to those students whose parents do not enroll them in the alternative program.

(4) If a parent enrolls a student in an alternative program, the board may charge that parent fees for the purpose of defraying all or a portion of any non-instructional costs that

(a) may be incurred by the board in offering the alternative program, and

(b) are in addition to the costs incurred by the board in providing its regular education program.

There is a distinction between section 21 alternative programs and other ways of providing choice. Some examples of choices that are not alternative programs are Francophone programs (programs that fall under section 10 of the *School Act*), courses such as Japanese Language and Culture 10-20-30 and programs that involve a single classroom or specific areas of interest such as daily physical education. The uniqueness of alternative programs lies in the existence of the following defined set of elements.

- A defined and consistent set of unique features intended to be long-term and sustainable. The program usually involves the entire elementary, junior high or senior high grades or a combination of these grades.

- An educational approach that affects the entire schooling experience of a child, such as, bilingual programs or religion-based alternatives.
- A school culture or environment that reflects the uniqueness of the program.

The following checklist is designed to help a board decide whether the program it is considering qualifies as an alternative program.

Does the program have the following elements?	
❑ Yes	• The program is based on a particular language, culture, religion, subject matter or teaching philosophy.
❑ Yes	• The program is *not* a Francophone program.
❑ Yes	• The program is *not* a special needs program.
❑ Yes	• The program is *not* a program of religious education offered by a separate school board.
❑ Yes	• The program is a consistent set of unique features intended to be long term and sustainable
❑ Yes	• The program involves the entire elementary, junior high or senior high grades or a combination of these grades.

If the answer is yes to ALL of the above, then the program under consideration qualifies as an alternative program under section 21.

Benefits and Challenges

When considering whether to offer an alternative program, school boards may wish to weigh some of the benefits and challenges that alternative programs often face. Benefits may include the potential for:

- improved instruction and student learning
- student opportunities to participate in a variety of enriching experiences without losing the benefit of the Alberta Learning core curriculum
- strong commitment from parents, who may be more strongly supportive of the school, staff and programs because they have specifically chosen the program for their children
- teachers to choose a working environment that corresponds to their particular skills, interests, expertise or beliefs
- increased compatibility between teaching and learning styles and classroom environments in alternative programs that are based on a particular teaching philosophy.

Challenges related to alternative programs may include the following.

- Space — The board needs to determine whether available school or community space is sufficient to support an alternative program, whether the program includes several grades or a whole school program.
- Enrolment — The board must determine the minimum enrolment needed to have a viable alternative program, as well as what the impact will be on regular program enrolment. The board must continue to offer the regular education program to those students whose parents do not enroll their children in the alternative program.
- Distance — Rural boards that cover large geographical areas may find distance particularly challenging.
- Transportation — Transportation funding for urban and rural school boards is different. Decisions must be made regarding what, if any, fees will be charged for transportation to alternative programs, and which students will be eligible for transportation services. Section 51 of the *School Act* permits boards to charge fees for transportation
- Fees — Section 21 of the *School Act* permits boards to charge fees for non-instructional costs associated with the alternative program that exceed the cost of providing for the board's regular education program.
- Expertise — A board must ensure that qualified staff members who would be well suited to the particular program are available or can be attracted to the program. A board must select administrators who understand and support the alternative program and who have the vision to further the alternative program.

A board may delegate authority for establishing alternative programs to a staff member. However, there are several advantages to boards reserving their legislative right to approve alternative programs.

- It indicates the board's commitment to the community.
- It allows the board to control the introduction of alternative programs and to control expenditures.
- It enables the board to control implementation, in accordance with its mission and policy.
- It gives legitimacy and continuity to the program, which can then be modified only by the board or as designated by the board.
- It responds to parental expectations, so that parents can be guaranteed consistent program content and delivery from classroom to classroom and from year to year.
- It provides opportunity for more in-depth board involvement in policy governance through the development of carefully considered policies.

Assessing Support Resources

Boards may explore alternative programs in the following ways.

- Develop an inventory of community resources and potential partnerships, explore the advantages of location and encourage community involvement in the school. For example:
  - a museum, agricultural college or research station may support a program that focuses on the sciences
  - a theatre group may support a fine arts program focus
  - a cultural centre may support a culture-based alternative program.
- Review the strengths and interests of existing staff. The expertise of staff in areas of language, culture, religion or a particular teaching philosophy may be a starting point for exploration of an alternative program.
- Consider provincial, national or international programs that have the potential to become an alternative program in the jurisdiction. Examples include the International Baccalaureate program, the Montessori program and the Science Alberta Foundation program.
- Discuss with other Alberta school boards the programs that are already being offered. Individual boards can provide more information about the alternative programs they offer. Some examples of alternative programs in Alberta are listed below by category along with some of the jurisdiction where they are being offered.

Alternative Program	School Board
All-Girls	Edmonton Public Schools
Christian	Elk Island Public Pembina Hills Red Deer Public
Fine Arts	Calgary Roman Catholic Separate Greater St. Albert Catholic
French Immersion	Elk Island Public Grande Prairie Public Grande Prairie Catholic Greater St. Albert Catholic Red Deer Catholic Wetaskiwin Regional Schools Wolf Creek
German	Calgary School District Edmonton Public Schools Elk Island Public
Hockey	Calgary School District Edmonton Public Schools
International Baccalaureate	Calgary Roman Catholic Separate Christ the Redeemer
Montessori	Lethbridge Public Schools
Science	Edmonton Public Schools

Checklist – Making a Decision

The following checklist will assist boards in deciding whether or not to offer an alternative program.

Yes	No	Action Items
❑	❑	Can you define the alternative program and do you clearly understand the concept?
❑	❑	Have you found books and information articles that support the alternative program?
❑	❑	Do you believe that the alternative program will make a positive difference for students?
❑	❑	Does your idea meet the requirements of section 21 of the *School Act*?
❑	❑	Do the board, central office staff, parents, school staff, community and students, where applicable, support the alternative program?
❑	❑	Have you examined the impact the alternative program may have on the school system? Have you considered unintentional consequences of this change?
❑	❑	Are the staff, school council, school board and Alternative Program Advisory Group, if applicable, committed to the process and involved in developing the alternative program?
❑	❑	Is there a team working to implement the alternative program?
❑	❑	Is there a clear statement of purpose and vision for the alternative program? Does everyone involved share an understanding of the purpose and vision?
❑	❑	Has the board reached an agreement with staff on policies, procedures and methodologies to be used to implement alternative programs? Has this agreement been communicated to jurisdiction stakeholders?
❑	❑	Have the parameters for the alternative program been established through consultation?
❑	❑	Have time and money been budgeted for ongoing staff development programs for those involved in the alternative program?
❑	❑	Have local decision makers been given maximum decision-making power and flexibility related to the alternative program?
❑	❑	Have central decision makers reached an agreement on budget allocation for the alternative program?
❑	❑	Has a fee structure for the alternative program been established through consultation?
❑	❑	Are the roles and responsibilities for all partners clearly defined?
❑	❑	Are any new roles clearly communicated to everyone?
❑	❑	Is there an ongoing monitoring process to determine if the alternative program is working well or needs modification?
❑	❑	Is there a process for evaluating and reporting the success of the alternative program?

DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION PROCESSES

Timeframe

The time required to develop and implement a new program will vary depending on the nature of the program and the requirements of the board's processes. It may take up to a full school year to plan and develop an alternative program. It is suggested that board approval be obtained by December of the year prior to the planned start date.

Facilitating the Process of Change

Alternative programs are programs of parental or student choice in that, once a board has decided to offer a program, the choice to enroll is that of the parent or student. Alternative programs are about doing things differently and they involve working collaboratively within the vision and mission of a particular program. Boards and schools wishing to introduce alternatives must be prepared to help facilitate change. This section offers some strategies for doing so.

A jurisdiction can start the process of change with those individuals in the jurisdiction who are already open and ready for change. Research indicates that people often fall into one of three categories: the innovators (15%), the vast majority who are willing to wait and see if the change is workable (70%) and the resistant (15%). The innovators can be challenged to:

- decide on a small, manageable project
- decide on required stakeholder involvement
- develop results to be achieved
- develop indicators
- evaluate results
- communicate results.

No single process is guaranteed to overcome resistance to change. However, according to Wagner (2001), the following are some key elements that are common across processes of change.

- Determine who will be affected by the change.
- Involve those affected and those with expertise in discussions related to the change.
- Ensure an open process where information is used to create shared understanding of the change.
- Use a consultative, problem-solving approach.
- Allow sufficient time for concerns to be addressed.
- Respect diverse opinions and seek constructive criticism.

To ensure a feeling of ownership for the change, there must be dialogue and critical inquiry among all members of the community. Members should not attempt a one-time effort, but rather the creation of conditions that promote ongoing, focused and consultative learning. Wagner (2001) identifies the following essential conditions.

- Shared vision of the goals of learning, good teaching and assessment as they relate to the mission, mandate, goals, results, strategies, and measures that are part of planning for success.
- Shared understanding of the urgent need for change. The degree of urgency may vary from community to community depending on the academic results achieved, the desire of parents and students for choice, the economy and changing demographics.
- Relationships based on mutual respect and trust. This is essential when working with proponent groups and is related to the need to spend the time required to build a solid relationship.
- Engagement/ownership strategies that create commitment rather than mere compliance. This relates to the way staffing is done and to the professional development provided for stakeholders.

Some of the following strategies could be used to help ensure a feeling of ownership for a change.

- Create a forum or a framework for discussion. Ensure that discussions are free of blame. Focus discussions on the desired characteristics of the alternative program rather than on criticism of existing options. Use facilitative strategies that encourage participants to create their vision of the alternative program instead of trying to solve the problems that may be perceived in existing programs.
- Provide time for educators and other community members to understand and discuss different ideas. Do not rush the process. Keep in mind that it may take approximately a year to work through a process for change.
- Understand that sustained change cannot be mandated. Consider using trained facilitators who can assist groups to problem solve and seek constructive criticism.

Framework

When a board decides to support alternative programs, it should develop an alternative program framework that includes elements such as the following:

- a board vision and mission statement
- a policy that outlines the board's position on the provision of choice in student programs
- procedures that outline the process through which alternative programs can be established and closed
- accountability processes to ensure that the alternative program meets the program goals and intended student learner outcomes specific to the program
- processes to ensure that the intended outcomes of alternative programs are measured and that the results are communicated to stakeholders.

To assist in developing a board policy, some excerpts from existing Alberta school jurisdiction policy statements have been included.

- "The Board of Trustees believes that alternative methods of delivering instructional services will enhance student learning." *Aspen View Regional Division (Policy HGBG – amended October 4, 1999)*
- "The board, as advocate of choice, will consider alternative programs which emphasize a particular language, culture, religion, subject-matter, or use a particular teaching philosophy. Such programs will be offered only in designated district centres." *Edmonton School District (Policy HABP – February 1, 2001)*
- "To provide for parental choice and to meet specific learning needs, Alternative Programs may be offered in Elk Island Public Schools." *Elk Island Public Schools (Policy HGBL – revised April 2000)*
- "The Board is committed to meeting the educational needs of all students in Lethbridge School District No. 51 and believes that Alternative Programs can assist in meeting these needs. Responsibility for establishment of Alternative Programs shall rest with the Board of Trustees. The board, therefore, directs that procedures be developed for the proposal, approval and operation of Alternative Programs within the school district." *Lethbridge School District (Policy 606.1 – approved January 16, 2001)*
- "The Board believes that, in order to allow for increased parental/student choice of learning experiences, public school education of an acceptable standard can be provided through program delivery models, which emphasize a particular language, culture, religion or subject matter or use a particular teaching philosophy or delivery medium which varies from standard school delivery models. Standard delivery models include Outreach, Off-campus and Special Education programs, as defined by Alberta Learning policy." *Parkland School Division (Policy H.10 – June 16, 1998)*
- "To provide for parental choice and to meet specific learning needs, Alternative Programs may be offered in Red Deer Public Schools." *Red Deer Public Schools (Policy 3.01 – approved February 10, 1999)*

Alternative Program Proposals

If a school board decides to implement alternative programs, a process should be in place for working with proponent groups and for evaluating program proposals.

Developing Proposals

Program proposals may originate either with parent and community groups or with school jurisdiction staff. Some considerations related to developing a program proposal are that:

- the proponent group must understand the school board policy framework and provincial legislation governing alternative programs, schools and school jurisdictions

- the school board's policy framework may require a formal written proposal, or it may allow for a more informal process of preliminary discussion
- the board should identify staff who would receive the proposal on behalf of the jurisdiction.

The program proposal may be written by the proponent group or the jurisdiction's administrative staff or the two groups working together. Some advantages of both groups working collaboratively are that the process:

- enables relationship building and trust
- builds understanding of roles and responsibilities
- enables the school jurisdiction to shape the program based on sound pedagogical principles
- enables staff to share the strengths and requirements of the jurisdiction with the proponent group
- allows parental involvement, which encourages student recruitment and provides the school board with proof of need and potential enrolment.

Misunderstanding of the outcomes of processes among participants or group members may lead to resentment and conflict, particularly if those being consulted are uncertain about where final decision-making authority resides. Parents and societies involved in alternative programs have a legitimate and important role to play in these programs, and the jurisdiction staff has a responsibility to work in a way that enables parents and societies to make the maximum contribution to the program. It also is critical that participants understand that, as mandated by the *School Act*, the decision-making authority will remain with the local school board and its administration. School boards are accountable for the results of the alternative program.

Evaluating Proposals

When the written proposal is received in accordance with board policy, the board may wish to use the following checklists to determine the proposal's completeness.

Checklist — Elements of the Program Proposal

- ❑ Name of program.
- ❑ Detailed description of the essential characteristics of the alternative program depending on its base of language, culture, subject matter, religion or teaching philosophy.
- ❑ Grades involved.
- ❑ Anticipated enrolment.
- ❑ Location and facility needs.
- ❑ Procedures to follow when more students want the program than originally anticipated or than the program can handle.
- ❑ Criteria for student admission, based on a description of the alternative program and its focus so that parents understand the intent of the program.
- ❑ Staffing requirements.
- ❑ Program monitoring and evaluation.
- ❑ Funding required, including funding for start-up and implementation costs, if applicable
- ❑ Transportation plans and transportation fees.
- ❑ Parent fees, if required.

Checklist — Evaluating the Program Proposal

- ❑ Consistency with the *School Act* and with Alberta Learning's vision, policies, mission and mandate for education.
- ❑ Consistency with the board's vision, mission, policies and administrative regulations.
- ❑ Consistency with sound educational theory and practice.
- ❑ Intended student benefits.
- ❑ Impact on current course and program offerings.
- ❑ Impact on facilities and financial and human resources.
- ❑ Availability of staff and instructional resources.
- ❑ Extent of demand for the program.
- ❑ Indication of long-term sustainability.
- ❑ Expected results.
- ❑ Measures to determine whether results are being achieved.

Implementation Plan

Whether or not a program is feasible and desirable depends on the nature of the program, the board's philosophical stance, the financial viability of the program and the board's policy framework. If the administration is satisfied that the program is feasible and desirable, the board should then create and follow an implementation plan. The information gathered during the evaluation of the proposal forms the basis for an implementation plan.

Appendix A (pages 33–34) outlines the tasks that need to be addressed when creating an implementation plan. Following are sections on program location, funding and fees, developing public awareness and cultivating interest, student profiles, and roles and responsibilities.

Program Location

To maximize accessibility, an alternative program should be located as close as possible to the main demand or key resource.

- Placing an alternative program in an operational school with an existing regular program is an effective strategy for improving space utilization and increasing enrolment in an under-utilized school. Including an alternative program as a dual track in a regular school also builds capacity for shared instructional expertise and developing respect for diversity. It is critical that participants in the operational school (parents and staff as well as students) and proponents of the alternative program develop a shared understanding that alternative programs are different, not better.
- A board may place an alternative program in an empty school or convert an operational school entirely to the alternative program, if students are provided with the option of attending a regular program elsewhere. If there is insufficient space in a board, or if the available space does not match the location or need of the students wishing to access the alternative program, the board may consider the use of non-school space to house the program.
- Boards also may need to determine whether or not they have the space available to offer an alternative program and whether attracting new students is a viable plan for the school they are considering using.

Funding and Fees

Section 21 of the *School Act* permits school boards to charge parents fees "for the purpose of defraying all or a portion of any non-instructional costs that may be incurred by the board in offering the alternative program, and are in addition to the costs incurred by the board in providing its regular education program."

When approving new programs, a board should make provision for any start-up costs as well as ongoing operational costs.

- There are no start-up grants for alternative programs available from Alberta Learning.
- A determination must be made whether to operate the program on the same funding framework as the board's regular programs, whether to charge fees for non-instructional costs in order to offset additional costs and/or whether to fund the alternative program at a different level.
- One of the important factors in making this determination is the community's acceptability of a fee and/or a different basis for funding. If a fee is established, the board should make a point of communicating this with parents to ensure an understanding and acceptance of the fee.
- A board should provide information that clearly outlines what the non-instructional fees will be used for.

Development of Public Awareness and Cultivating Interest

If the newly approved program has a proponent group, they will likely have created some public awareness in order to demonstrate the demand for the program. The school board can then build on this work to confirm interest, increase public awareness of the alternative program and determine an estimate of student and parent interest.

Possible advertising strategies include sending individual letters to families who have expressed an interest, holding community information meetings, placing newspaper advertisements, and sending out school newsletters to families and the community. Any of these communication tools should include the following information.

- Dates, times and locations of any information sessions that are planned. Community information meetings are an excellent strategy for sharing program information that can result in acceptance and promotion leading to increased student enrolment.
- A general description of the program.
- The address and phone number of the school where the alternative program may be located.
- The registration process.
- Contacts who can provide additional information.

Student Profile

Alternative programs, as programs of choice, are established to meet the specific educational interests or needs of students and their parents. Not all alternative programs are appropriate for every student. Because alternative programs are programs of choice, a student profile should be developed so that students, parents and the board can make decisions that are in the best educational interest of a student. A student profile helps parents and the board determine if the alternative program will meet student needs, support student success and ensure that a student will not be educationally disadvantaged by being enrolled in the alternative program. The student profile should be part of all documentation that is provided to students and

parents interested in the alternative program so that they can make an informed decision as to the appropriateness of the alternative program.

Some ideas that may be included in a student profile are the following.

- A language-based program might state that, after a certain grade, students who are not fluent in the language would not be admitted to the program because the student would not have the language to be successful.
- A science-based program might state that, to be successful, students should have achieved a mark of at least 75% in science in the previous year.
- A dance-based program might specify that the student must have the ability to participate in a physically active environment.
- Some alternative programs may have "audition criteria" where the student would audition to gain admittance because the level of instruction would be geared to students already skilled in the particular alternative focus.

Boards must enroll students in the alternative program of the parents' choice if the board believes:

- the program is appropriate to meet the student's needs and the student will be successful
- the program has sufficient resources and facilities to accommodate the student.

If parents want to register their child in an alternative program and the board determines that the program is not appropriate to meet the student's educational needs or the board does not have sufficient resources and/or facilities to support the student in the program, after consultation with the parents, the board may refuse to enroll the student in the alternative program. In such cases, it is important to communicate clearly with parents the particular student profile criteria and how a student who does not meet the criteria may be educationally disadvantaged in the alternative program.

The board's plan should describe how student selection will be made if there is not enough room in an alternative program for all students who apply.

Roles and Responsibilities

In order to have a successful alternative program, it is important for the board to identify staff members who understand and support the program's vision and approach. The staff also must be qualified and competent to deliver the particular program.

- For programs based on language and culture, teachers require a high level of proficiency in the target language as well as training in second language instruction. School jurisdictions are advised to acquire or develop instruments for determining language proficiency. If jurisdiction staff members are not qualified to carry out a target language or second

language proficiency screening, assistance may be available from a post-secondary institution or another jurisdiction.

- In staffing programs based on religion, interviews should be structured to focus on the applicant's qualifications, experience and support for the program goals and the outcomes related to the program. Applicants must understand that they are being recruited to deliver a program that corresponds to the vision, mission and description of the particular alternative.
- Programs based on teaching philosophy pose some unique staffing challenges because decisions regarding teaching philosophy and methodology are considered to be a central component of a teacher's professionalism. Again, applicants need to understand that they are being recruited to deliver a program based on a specific teaching philosophy. Many parents who choose to send their children to an alternative program will have high expectations that the particular teaching philosophy is visible in all classrooms at all times. Therefore, interview processes and questions need to be designed so that interview panel members are able to engage the candidate in an in-depth discussion of the methodology and the teaching philosophy that define the program.

A jurisdiction also will need to make a number of decisions regarding the assignment of authority and responsibility to staff, as well as to other key players. Following are examples of possible roles for each of the staff and key players (principals, teachers, central office staff, school councils, community members, Program Advisory Groups, board of trustees and Alberta Learning) in an alternative program. Some roles and responsibilities will vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.

Role of Principals

The role of a principal is set out in section 20 of the *School Act.*
The role of the school principal who administers an alternative program is key to its successful implementation and ongoing operation and is essentially the same as the role of principals in any other school. When appointing a principal to an alternative program, it is helpful to provide candidates with a clear description of both the program and the desired characteristics of the principal.

The role may include the following characteristics.

- Understand and support the program philosophy.
- Have a clear vision of the intended results of the alternative program.
- Be able to communicate this vision to others and to turn the vision into action plans.
- In consultation with personnel services, determine appropriate staffing. Some jurisdictions include the school council, society or Program Advisory Group in various aspects of the interviewing process. Consideration may be given to hiring an assistant principal or curriculum coordinator with particular expertise in the emphasis of the alternative program.

- Leaders also must work with office and support staff to ensure they understand the program so that they too can support it as necessary.
- Ensure that the program is implemented in a manner consistent with the program definition established by the board.
- Ensure appropriate professional development for staff.
- Publicize the program.
- Facilitate interest in the program.
- Work in consultation with parents and community members.
- Liaise with parent societies and/or Program Advisory Groups, if applicable.
- Maintain a cooperative and harmonious environment in the school and among various programs in the school. Some strategies to achieve this include:
  - ensuring representation from all programs on the school council
  - encouraging students from all programs to interact via assemblies, teams, intramurals, etc.
  - having staff meet and work together to exchange information and ideas.
- Establish or join a network among principals of other schools with alternative programs to share ideas, strategies and resources, and to ensure program consistency across the jurisdiction in cases where an alternative is offered in multiple locations.
- Evaluate or provide for the evaluation of the program.

Role of Teachers

The role of teachers is set out in section 18 of the *School Act*. The role of teachers in an alternative program is not substantially different from the role of teachers in any other program.

It is essential that teachers in an alternative program be philosophically aligned with the particular program, and the hiring processes should ensure that teacher candidates have a full understanding of the nature of the program and the expectations placed on its staff.

Cain (2001) highlights some teacher characteristics that may apply to an alternative program. An ideal teacher:

- is philosophically aligned with the program
- is aware that they are an integral part of the program and that the program is an integral part of the school, if it is located in a setting where both the alternative program and a traditional program are offered (dual-track)
- is able to clearly articulate the alternative program vision and mission
- works well with parents and/or Alternative Program Advisory Groups
- works in consultation with staff in the program and, if it is located in a dual-track setting, with other staff in the school
- participates in the implementation and growth of the alternative program
- takes initiatives to help the program grow and succeed
- is comfortable working within the mission and vision of the program
- avoids competitive comments
- recognizes that the alternative program is not better, but is different
- is comfortable with both alternative and regular programs and acknowledges the potential of both programs to provide success for students.

Role of Central Office Staff

The role of central office staff is key to the development of new programs and, subsequently, to providing support to the school administrators. The role of central office staff may include the following.

- Work with staff and/or community groups seeking new alternative programs. This includes attending meetings and discussions about the program definition, identifying resources, determining demand and reviewing other program development issues.
- Make a recommendation to the board regarding the approval of a new program.
- Provide support, advice and assistance to administrators, parent societies and/or Program Advisory Groups by:
  - identifying research and resources as required
  - providing program-related expertise and professional development
  - providing leadership training
  - assisting principals in identifying appropriate staff
  - organizing and coordinating transportation services where necessary
  - assisting in problem-solving and conflict resolution.
- Provide ongoing liaison, advice, assistance and problem resolution skills to parent societies on behalf of the jurisdiction.

Jurisdiction leadership staff members who work with alternative programs are, in essence, acting as change agents. Nickols (2000) identifies the following skills as important for an effective change agent.

- Environmental Scanning Skills – change agents need to understand their own organization and the community group or groups with whom they are interacting.

- Analytical skills – change agents must be able to identify essential elements and operations and how to reassemble them in novel ways to accommodate different ways of doing things; for example, recognizing where an alternative program proposal may come into conflict with jurisdiction policy, practices or values, and how to accommodate this.
- People skills – change agents must be able to interact in consultation with organization staff and proponent groups; for example, by facilitating input on policy or working with a proponent group on an alternative program request.
- System skills – change agents need to understand the impact of change in one or many areas of the organization; for example, recognizing how a particular alternative program will impact areas such as staffing, curriculum and computer technology.
- Business skills – change agents need to understand jurisdiction and school finances; for example, determining whether or not an alternative is financially viable and/or how many students it needs in order to be financially viable.

Role of School Councils

In addition to the role ascribed to school councils in section 22 of the *School Act*, a school council may, at its discretion, take on a variety of roles related to alternative programs. These could include the following.

- Work with a school principal and jurisdiction staff to develop an alternative program for the school in accordance with the jurisdiction's policy framework. The school council could provide input into a new alternative program or provide reflection on an alternative program already proposed for their school. It also may be asked to form a working committee with central office staff to develop a detailed proposal.
- Provide input into the potential use of a school as a site for a new program developed by a proponent group other than the school council.
- Create bylaws that facilitate the operation of more than one program in a school. The *School Council Resource Manual* contains sample bylaws and development processes.
- Assist in the promotion of the school and all of its programs.
- Help build understanding of the school program(s) within the community.

Role of Community Members

The two major roles that community members or groups might perform are:

- proposing an alternative program
- providing expertise and resources to support an alternative program.

Role of Program Advisory Groups

Parents and community members who support a particular alternative program may choose to organize themselves into either an informal Program Advisory Group or a formal society in accordance with the *Societies Act*.

Individuals wishing to form a society can obtain information from the Government Services department, which has a Web site at <www.gov.ab.ca/gs>. A society is self-regulating and may determine its own bylaws and eligibility for membership. Effective program societies are usually structured so that all parents of students enrolled in a program are automatically made members. Other interested individuals also may be members.

Jurisdictions need policies or protocols for working with such groups and defining their roles. Although a school jurisdiction cannot regulate an independent society, it can, through either regulation or protocol, define how it will interact with such societies and what role they will play in relation to the school system and the alternative program. Excerpts follow from a protocol established by Edmonton Public Schools (1999) that outlines the role of program-related societies in that jurisdiction.

> *"The jurisdiction recognizes the legitimacy of program-related societies as advisory bodies, and appreciates both its ability and its obligation to consult with these societies on important program issues. It also expects that program-related societies, if they wish to be seen as speaking for program parents, are able to demonstrate that they include parent representation and can indicate their basis for believing they represent the views of parents. It is recognized that only the Board of Trustees can change the nature or intent of an approved program. ... Unless specifically agreed to by parents, and formally set up in that manner, the society does not take on the role of the school council. The school council would continue to be subject to requirements of the School Act and provincial regulations."*

The role of Program Advisory Groups is key in identifying new alternatives and working with school administration to support current options. The role may include:

- partnering with the school and school jurisdiction to ensure the integrity of the program
- providing advice and input to school administrators, the central office and the board on matters related to the program as a whole
- assisting in the recruitment of students to the program.

Role of the Board of Trustees

The role of the board of trustees is to:

- provide a philosophical stance and articulate this through the use of mission statements, board policies and administrative regulations
- approve alternative programs, if this is part of the board's policy framework.

Role of Alberta Learning

The role of Alberta Learning involves:

- the provision of alternative program legislation in the *School Act*
- the provision of advice and assistance to jurisdictions through Field Services.

Several documents are available to assist in the development of new and changing roles and responsibilities. Alberta Learning's *School Council Resource Manual* (1995) and *School-Based Decision Making Resource Guide* (1997) contain information and workshop outlines that have been effective in many jurisdictions in Alberta. It is important that key players work together to develop roles and responsibilities that are accepted as meaningful and appropriate.

Communication Plan

The jurisdiction should have a plan to communicate the introduction of any new alternative program to parents, community members and other schools in the jurisdiction.

- The communication process should begin with the introduction of the possibility of the program.
- A plan should be drawn up to provide for weekly, bi-weekly or monthly reports of initial progress toward the start-up date and to continue with reports of progress toward full implementation.
- School newsletters, news releases, reports to various groups in the community and cross-jurisdiction staff bulletins are possible mechanisms for communicating with all those who may be influenced by the establishment of an alternative program in the jurisdiction.

Accountability Plan

Alberta Learning requires that every school jurisdiction annually prepare and make available to the public a *Three-year Education Plan* and an *Annual Education Results Report*. This requirement, along with the mandated provincial achievement testing program, provides the provincial framework with respect to accountability. The framework applies equally to the regular education program and to alternative programs. Therefore, the method used to assess the effectiveness of an alternative program should be similar to the method used to assess the effectiveness of a regular education program.

Parents who enroll their children in alternative programs expect that their children will not be in any way disadvantaged with respect to their achievement on Alberta Learning's regular *Programs of Study*. Therefore, students' achievement on Alberta's grade 3, 6 and 9 Provincial Achievement Tests and the grade 12 Diploma Exams are important elements of an alternative program assessment.

In addition to reporting on student achievement, Alberta Learning also requires school jurisdictions to report on student and parent satisfaction in their *Annual Education Results Report*. It is appropriate for school jurisdictions to use the same instrument to measure satisfaction with alternative and regular programs.

A board may decide to conduct an evaluation to determine if the alternative program is achieving the intended results. This enables a school and jurisdiction to effectively communicate the results achieved in the school year and the direction for the future. Reporting on program goals and results achieved as well as student achievement, student need and student, teacher and parent satisfaction strengthens the commitment of the community and ensures continued support for the alternative program.

Section 20 of the *School Act* requires principals to evaluate or provide for the evaluation of programs offered at the school. In addition to assessing an alternative program through the tools that are common to all programs, a jurisdiction may choose to require that the principal arrange to assess the elements of the program that make it an alternative.

Alberta Learning's *School-Based Decision Making Resource Guide* contains a chapter on assessing and reporting progress (Chapter 8). This information could be adapted for use in the assessment of an alternative program.

Following are some suggestions for developing assessment tools for alternative programs.

- In initial planning for the alternative program, goals, objectives and intended results are established. Critical elements of the program are identified. Strategies such as focus groups with parents, students, staff and program support groups help identify how well these groups believe the intended results and critical elements of the program are being achieved. These focus groups also can work together to develop indicators and measures that can be used to monitor the progress made by students in the alternative program.
- Program-specific satisfaction surveys can be developed to collect data on perceptions of the alternative program within the broader school community.
- In language programs, tests of oral and written proficiency can be developed.

- Depending on the nature of the alternative program, it may be possible to invite outside professionals or experts to help monitor and evaluate student work related to the focus of the program. For example:
  - in an arts program, professional artists can provide feedback on student artwork
  - in a science program, arrangements can be made to submit experiments for critique by a university, an agricultural station or an organization such as the Association of Professional Engineers, Geologists and Geophysicists of Alberta (APEGGA)
  - in music and dance programs, students can receive external feedback through music/dance festivals and examinations.

If the assessment process indicates that the program is not successful in achieving the intended results, the school and jurisdiction can develop plans to address these deficiencies. If difficulties persist, it may become necessary to consider closure of the program. The jurisdiction's policy framework should address closure of an alternative program.

Caution must be exercised in making program comparisons based on the data gathered from an alternative program. Some parents and school jurisdictions want to prove that an alternative program is better than the regular education program by citing achievement test results. Unless a formal research study has been structured to ensure that the students in the two programs are comparable, such conclusions are not valid. It is impossible to say how well students in an alternative program would have performed had they been in a different program.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Standards

1. Is there a provincial policy on alternative programs?

Not at this time. However, Alberta Learning is working with stakeholders to discuss the possible development of a new provincial policy on section 21 of the *School Act*.

2. If I enroll my child in an alternative program, will my child be taught from the same curriculum as students in the regular program?

Yes. It is the responsibility of the board to ensure that the instruction provided by the teachers employed in the alternative program is consistent with the *Programs of Study* and education programs/courses prescribed, approved and/or authorized by Alberta Learning. Students in alternative programs are required to meet the same standards as those in regular education programs.

3. Will my child be as well prepared for Provincial Achievement Tests and Diploma Exams as students in the regular program?

Yes. All schools must teach the prescribed Alberta *Programs of Study*. All students have equal opportunity to learn the material necessary to be successful in Provincial Achievement Tests and Diploma Exams.

4. Are alternative programs only available to students who meet certain criteria?

Alternative programs, as programs of choice, are established to meet the specific educational interests or needs of students and their parents. In order to support student success, it is critical that students, their parents and the board look for a match between the specific educational interests or needs of the student and the focus of the alternative program. Not all alternative programs are appropriate for every student.

Boards must enroll students in the alternative program of the parents' choice if the board believes:

- the program is appropriate to meet the student's needs and the student will be successful
- the program has sufficient resources and facilities to accommodate the student.

If a parent wants to register their child in an alternative program and the board determines that the program is not appropriate to meet the student's educational needs or the board does not have sufficient resources and/or facilities to support the student in the program, after consultation with the parent, the board may refuse to enroll the student in the alternative program. In such cases, it is important to communicate clearly with parents the particular student profile criteria and how a student who does not meet the criteria may be educationally disadvantaged in the alternative program.

5. Can parents be assured that teachers in the alternative program are subject to the same standards of professional conduct and competence as those in the schools offering regular programs?

Yes. Teachers in alternative programs must hold a valid Alberta teaching certificate, so they are held to the standards of professional conduct and competence for all teachers set out by the Alberta Teachers' Association and also to the Teaching Quality Standard established by Alberta Learning.

6. What if I want an alternative program for my child and the board will not provide the alternative program?

Alternative programs are offered at the discretion of the board.

7. If our jurisdiction does not provide the alternative program we want for our child, may we send our child to an alternative school in another jurisdiction?

Yes, it is possible. A board can enroll a student who is a resident of another board under section 44 of the *School Act* if, in the opinion of the board enrolling the student, there are sufficient resources and facilities available to accommodate the student.

8. Do Alberta school jurisdictions have common rules regarding the establishment of alternative programs?

No. There is no requirement for common rules at the school jurisdiction level. Provincial legislation provides common ground. Section 21 of the *School Act* provides parameters within which an alternative program can be established by a board. Boards are encouraged to have an alternative program policy. These policies may differ somewhat from board to board, but the board policy must fall within the legislation of the government.

9. Should we expect our alternative program to meet measurable outcomes specific to the program?

No. Alternative programs are held to the same standard as regular programs. A board may choose to require further measurable outcomes from any or all of its programs. Boards should establish processes to ensure that all stakeholders know the outcomes of alternative programs.

a. Should our jurisdiction/school have a plan for program evaluation?

In the process of establishing an alternative program, the board, its administration and stakeholders will develop goals and determine if it is desirable to identify specific measurable outcomes. Section 20 of the *School Act* states that the principal must evaluate or provide for the evaluation of programs offered in the school.

b. Who should be involved in program evaluation?

Board policy should determine the processes, procedures and involvement of stakeholders in a program evaluation.

10. Can an alternative program group demand a stand-alone facility for an alternative program?

No. Alternative programs are offered at the discretion of the board. The board determines where the program is to be offered.

11. What kind of timeline should we expect for a board decision about our alternative program proposal?

Board policy should specify a timeframe within which an alternative program proposal must be submitted to and considered by a board in order for the proposal to be approved for operation in the subsequent school year. For further information, see page 7 – Timeframe.

12. As parents of children in the alternative program, do we have any say in staff selection or program decision-making? Do we have a specific voice?

You may join the school council. Or you may join a Program Advisory Group, which is a group of stakeholders with a particular interest in the alternative program who may provide advice and input on the alternative program to school administrators, the school council or the board. A Program Advisory Group is established at the discretion of the board.

13. If the board decides to establish a Program Advisory Group, what might its role be?

Board policy should define the role that any Program Advisory Group will have, if one is established, including any delegated powers and the relationship of the Program Advisory Group to the principal of the school administering the alternative program. For further information see pages 18 and19 – Role of Program Advisory Groups.

14. What is the role of the school council in relation to the establishment and operation of an alternative program in a school?

Provincial legislation states that a school council may, at its discretion, advise the principal and the board on any matter relating to the school. That includes the establishment and operation of an alternative program. For further information, see page 18 – Role of School Councils.

15. What is the relationship between the school council and the Program Advisory Group, if one is established?

The school council may make and implement policies that the council considers necessary to carry out its functions. It may also make bylaws governing the conduct of its affairs. This includes the possibility of creating a role for a Program Advisory Group representative on the school council. The council establishes the role of the school council and its relationship to any Program Advisory Group, within the parameters of provincial policy and regulation.

16. Our group is planning to form a society.

a. Is a society the same as a Program Advisory Group?

No. A society is organized under the *Societies Act* and acts as an independent body.

b. What is the relationship of a society to the board?

If a board chooses to involve a society to act as a Program Advisory Group, the board determines the society's role in relation to the alternative program administered by the board.

17. In a school with multiple programs, how can we ensure that the voice of parents in all programs gets adequate representation?

All parents of students in a school may be members of the school council. A school council may choose to provide input and advice to the principal and school staff. In a school with multiple programs, the school council may create bylaws to provide for formal representation on the council by members of the parent community representing different programs.

18. Does my child have a right to attend an alternative program even though we are not on the bus route to the school where the program is housed?

Yes. However, transportation to the alternative program might not be provided by the school jurisdiction. Provincial legislation states that a board shall provide for the transportation of a student to and from the site of a school in which the board has enrolled the student, if the student resides within the attendance area established by the board.

If you choose to have your child attend an alternative program that is not within the attendance area established by the board, then as the parent you may be responsible for transportation or transportation costs.

19. If I register my child in an alternative program, must my child stay in that program even if circumstances change or the program is not providing what I expect for my child's needs?

No. The parent makes the decision to enroll a student in an alternative program. If the parent determines that the program is not meeting the needs of the student, the parent may transfer the student to a regular program in the school or another school. Section 45 of the *School Act* states that a parent of a student enrolled in a school shall not request that the student be transferred to another school during a school year unless the board operating the other school agrees.

20. Is there a minimum number of students required before a board can approve an alternative program?

There is no provincial legislation governing the minimum number of students required to establish an alternative program. However, in order to ensure that the program will have long-term sustainability and that the necessary resources are available for a program, a board will need to determine the minimum number of students required to establish a program.

21. Can a board close an alternative program?

Yes. Alternative programs are created and closed at the discretion of the board. The board must act in accordance with school closure regulation and section 58 of the *School Act* if the alternative program is any of the following:

- three or more consecutive grades in an elementary school
- an entire junior or senior high school program
- a whole school.

22. When boards offer alternative programs, what expectations are there for meeting the needs of students with special needs?

Boards that offer alternative programs must continue to provide regular education programs and provide for special education programs. An alternative program, as described under section 21 of the *School Act,* cannot be a special education program. See page 2 for the wording of section 21 (see also question 4, page 23).

23. Can an alternative program be a special education program?

No. The *School Act* states that alternative programs are based on language, religion, culture, subject matter or teaching philosophy.

24. How can I ensure that there are plans in place for program extension into higher grades if the alternative program is successful?

During the initial planning for an alternative program, it is important that the jurisdiction study the feasibility of program sustainability and extension to higher grade levels. Parents who are concerned about the long-term sustainability of a program should check that such plans are in place. There is no way to ensure that a program is extended to higher grades; however, it is in the best interest of the jurisdiction, the school and the students that such plans be put in place, where appropriate.

25. I do not support the concept of alternative programs. If my school jurisdiction approves an alternative program in the school where I teach, must I teach in that program?

Technically, yes. A board has the right to assign duties to its employees. However, the Professional Code of Conduct states that a teacher may protest the assignment of duties for which the teacher is not qualified or conditions which make it difficult to render professional service. If the teacher believes it will be more difficult to provide professional service in a particular alternative program, the teacher may submit a request to the board to transfer to another school or to another teaching position in the school.

26. What if our parent group does not support the proposed alternative program in our local school or in our jurisdiction?

A board seeking to establish an alternative program in its jurisdiction may seek input from parents in the school where the program is to be operated. Parents can provide input to a board on any issue in a jurisdiction. However, the *School Act* clearly states that alternative programs are established at the discretion of a school board.

27. What can our school staff learn from the alternative program in our jurisdiction?

School jurisdictions may choose to ask school staff members in alternative programs to share new knowledge and skills learned through instruction in a particular alternative. For example, a Fine Arts alternative program could be an excellent source of expertise for other school staff wishing to deepen their learning about the role of Fine Arts in student development and to incorporate new planning, instruction and assessment strategies into their own professional practice.

Equity

28. Who is responsible for travel costs for my child to attend an alternative program?

Section 51 of the *School Act* permits boards to charge fees for transportation, but a board may decide not to charge fees. Before making the decision to enroll your child in an alternative program, you will want to check with the school jurisdiction to find out if there is a fee for transportation.

29. Are alternative programs only available to families that can afford the extra costs for supplies, uniforms and/or transportation?

Many alternative programs do not have extra costs for parents. For those that do, it is the parent who chooses an alternative program and in making this choice must determine whether the program is affordable for the family. A board must provide all students in both regular and alternative programs with access to a quality education that meets the standards set by Alberta Learning.

30. What funding does Alberta Learning provide to assist in start-up costs such as meeting extra administration costs, providing a facility and meeting capital resource needs for start-up?

Alberta Learning provides funding for basic instruction to boards. Boards determine the funding allocation to programs and to cover start-up costs.

31. What fees can be charged for an alternative program? What level of accountability is required for these funds?

Section 21(4) of the *School Act* states "if a parent enrolls a student in an alternative program, the board may charge that parent fees for the purpose of defraying all or a portion of any non-instructional costs that (a) may be incurred by the board in offering the alternative program, and (b) are in addition to the costs incurred by the board in providing its regular education program". In addition, section 124(1)(e) states that a parent may request in writing that the Minister review "the amount and payment of fees or costs".

In accordance with the *School Act*, boards are accountable to the Minister for all funds expended in a jurisdiction. Budgets and financial statements of a board are public documents that may be viewed by anyone.

32. Is there any restriction on the amount of non-instructional fees that a board can set for an alternative program?

Yes. A board may charge fees to defray all or part of any non-instructional costs incurred by the board in offering the alternative program that are in addition to the costs incurred by the board in providing its regular education program. Therefore, the board is restricted to establishing fees only to recover any expenditure in excess of the cost of a regular program.

Process

33. What process can we use to initiate an alternative program proposal?

Individuals or groups interested in initiating an alternative program proposal should check with their jurisdiction to determine the process set out by the board.

34. What process should be used to respond to a request for an alternative program?

A board and its central office staff determine the process for responding to an alternative program request.

35. What criteria should be incorporated into a feasibility study of an alternative program proposal?

See page 11 – Checklist – Elements of the Program Proposal and Checklist – Evaluating the Program Proposal.

36. How much input do parents have into the selection of a facility to house the alternative program?

The board makes the decision about the location of an alternative program; however, parents may provide input to the board about the choice of location.

37. What kinds of alternative programs exist in Alberta?

A wide variety of programs are available to Alberta students and school jurisdictions. See page 5 for a list of examples of alternative programs in Alberta.

38. Will the creation of new alternative programs erode the viability of our small rural school?

An alternative program may, in fact, increase viability of small schools. Some jurisdictions have established alternative programs as a mechanism to increase enrolment in schools that are in danger of closing due to low enrolment. In some cases, some of the resident students of a board may be attending other schools due to a perception that they have insufficient choice of courses in their small school. A board may find that an alternative program can better meet the needs of its resident students.

39. What evidence is there that alternative programs are desirable? Do students learn more?

Alternative programs are different, not better, than regular education programs. Boards establish alternative programs to provide choice for parents and students who may be interested in an education program that emphasizes a particular language, culture, religion, subject matter or teaching philosophy.

40. What if the board doesn't support alternative programs?

Alternative programs are established at the discretion of the board. If a board believes that the implementation of a particular alternative program will have a negative impact on the community, such as the creation of divisiveness, it has the right not to establish a program.

41. I am concerned that opening an alternative program in our neighbourhood school will increase problems such as traffic, parking and student loitering. How can we get our voice heard during the board decision-making process about offering and choosing locations for alternative programs?

A board seeking to establish an alternative program in its jurisdiction may seek input from the community where the program is to operate. A community may provide input to a board on any issue in a jurisdiction. However, the *School Act* states that alternative programs are established at the discretion of a school board.

APPENDIX A: CHECKLIST — DEVELOPING A PROGRAM

Task	Most Responsible Person	Timeline	Budget
1. Review the board vision, mission, and mandate to determine if it supports alternative programs.			
2. Develop a board policy with respect to programs.			
3. Determine the need for a requirement to have a formal written program proposal for board consideration.			
4. A request for an alternative program is received.			
5. Determine whether the request meets the requirements of section 21.			
6. Evaluate the program proposal.			
7. Determine the level of support for the program from the board, school, parents, community and students.			
8. Examine research to determine support for the proposed program, if it is based on language, subject matter or teaching philosophy.			
9. Build understanding, support and commitment at all levels.			
10. Develop criteria to assess the impact and feasibility of the program.			
11. Determine the probable impact of the program on the jurisdiction.			
12. Do a cost analysis of initial program implementation and ongoing program cost.			
13. Determine the role of any Program Advisory Group that may be established.			
14. Establish a Program Advisory Group with representatives from all stakeholders.			
15. Plan school, community and parent consultation processes.			
16. Clarify the roles and responsibilities of those involved.			

Task	Most Responsible Person	Timeline	Budget
17.Use the Program Advisory Group and consultation processes to: • establish a common, shared definition of the program • establish a vision and purpose for the program • set program goals • develop intended student learning outcomes • establish criteria for program evaluation • set anticipated student enrolment, grade distribution and building requirements • determine a student profile • determine the program start-up date • determine whether fees will be charged and, if so, the amount.			
18.Develop a communication plan.			
19.Develop a professional development plan.			
20.Develop a staff recruitment plan.			
21.Determine the general implementation guidelines for: • facility • staff • registration • program resources • timetable • communication • staff development program.			
22.Develop an assessment plan, results and measures.			

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FEEDBACK FORM

We hope the *Alternative Programs Handbook* is helpful. Please indicate your agreement with the following statements about this resource.

This handbook contains relevant information for stakeholders interested in establishing alternative programs.
❑ strongly agree ❑ agree ❑ disagree ❑ strongly disagree

This handbook contains useful processes for stakeholders interested in establishing alternative programs.
❑ strongly agree ❑ agree ❑ disagree ❑ strongly disagree

This handbook is well organized.
❑ strongly agree ❑ agree ❑ disagree ❑ strongly disagree

This handbook is easy to read and understand.
❑ strongly agree ❑ agree ❑ disagree ❑ strongly disagree

We welcome your comments and suggestions on this handbook.

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